

Southport Congregational Church
523 Pequot Road
Southport
Fairfield County
Connecticut

HABS No. CONN-311

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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SOUTHPORT CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

Location: 523 Pequot Road (northwest side of street), Southport, Fairfield County, Connecticut.

USGS Westport Quadrangle Map; Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 18.644770.4554940.

Present Owner and Occupant: Southport Congregational Society

Present Use: Religious services and church offices.

Statement of Significance: The Southport Congregational Church is designed in the High Victorian Gothic manner by locally prominent architects Lambert and Bunnell, and erected in 1874-75. It is constructed of granite ashlar masonry with a lighter stone around openings. Contrasts in the building materials have the effect of accentuating sections and details. While the exterior design emphasizes asymmetry and variegated massing, a sense of balance is achieved. The rectangular nave section functions as the central axis in the composition. The flanking tower and its polygonal wooden spire to one side is counter-balanced by the porte-cochere crowned by a slender bell-cote on the other. Inside, the nave's main roof is supported by a hammerbeam truss system, the members of which are carved in quatrefoil and stylized Gothic motifs. The Southport Congregational Society was organized in March 1843, and has remained an influential cultural force in the community since that time.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1874-75. In 1871, parish members recognized the need for a new church. Raising the necessary funds and acquiring the building materials took three years. The Southport "Chronicle" reported on July 12, 1871, "The members of the Southport Congregational Society held a special meeting, on the 4th of July and reconsidered the action taken at a previous meeting with a view to remodel the old church and erect a new lecture-room. They determined to give up the plan of remodelling,

and voted unanimously to build a new church at a cost of \$30,000. We believe that the whole amount, with the exception of a small sum, has already been pledged, and we hear that the work of building will proceed as soon as possible."

By May 23, 1874 the work had begun. The "Chronicle" noted that "the church was started from its foundation Tuesday of this week, and seemed to move with the 'greatest of ease.' Mr. Gould, the veteran builder-mover has charge of the job." The new stone church was dedicated on February 2, 1876.

2. Architects: Lambert & Bunnell. The "Chronicle" reported on September 18, 1872: "We were shown by Messrs. Lambert & Bunnell, Architects in Bridgeport, two drawings of the new Congregational church which it is designed to build in Southport. These plans, one a front, and the other a side view, are very handsome, and we hope and expect soon to see them copied in stone, an ornament to the village." The architects signed the final contract for the design of stone building on June 4, 1874.

Henry A. Lambert and Rufus B. Bunnell were a Bridgeport architectural firm who designed several buildings in Southport during the 1860s and 70s. Their work here included the Moses Bulkley House, 176 Main Street (Conn-299), the Mrs. Benjamin Pomeroy House, 658 Pequot Road (Conn-298), the Mrs. Zalmon Wakeman House, 418 Harbor Road (Conn-297), and the Southport Congregational Church. For a considerable period during the latter part of the nineteenth century, according to Bunnell, he and Lambert were the only architects practicing in the Bridgeport area. By 1881 the firm had dissolved; two items in the "Bridgeport Standards" newspaper listed Lambert as practicing alone.

3. Original and subsequent owners: The Southport Congregational Society purchased the land upon which the present structure stands in February, 1835. The Society has owned this land since that time. They erected the first church on this site, a wooden edifice, in 1841-42. The congregation was officially organized and the building dedicated on March 7, 1843.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: The Southport "Chronicle" followed the church's construction in close detail during 1874. In the following items, the local newspaper recorded simultaneously the workmen involved and the building's progress.

- May 6, 1874 The "new Congregational Church is to [be] constructed of stone; that new parties from Westerly, R.I., are to furnish the stone and do the masonry work: and that Messrs. Jelliff and Northrop are to do the carpenter work."
- June 10, 1874 "The Congregational Church lot was surveyed Monday of this week."
- June 17, 1874 "The contractor for the new church is Mr. Geo. Leadward, of Westerly, R.I."
- "It has been decided to build the new Church on the old site, and work has begun Monday of this week. Ground broken."
- July 22, 1874 "The Second load of stone for the new church arrived a few days since and was discharged on Mr. W.B. Meekers dock."
- August 5, 1874 "Another load of stone arrived . . ."
- September 9,
1874 "The walls of the new church are now on their way upward. The stone is said to be of very good quality, though many assert that it was originally intended for paving stone."

5. Original plan and construction: The church edifice, as constructed in 1874, was nearly rectangular in plan. While the exterior design emphasizes asymmetry and variegated massing, a sense of balance is achieved. The auditorium section functions as the central axis with the flanking tower and its tall spire to the east and the porte cochere crowned by a slender decorative bell-cote as the balancing element in the composition to the west. It is constructed of granite ashlar masonry laid in regular six-inch courses and trimmed with a lighter cut stone around openings and at the gable ends. This contrast in building materials has the effect of accenting sections and details. The arrangement of the central block's front facade is symmetrical. Dominating the order of the facade is an expansive Perpendicular window filled with triple-lancet and multifoil tracery and outlined by a thick-set lancet arch of cut stone. Penetrating the base of this large window is the pointed arch of the tabernacle doorway.

A pair of lancet-arched multi-paneled oak doors is set four thicknesses deep into this surround. At either side of the doorway, thick wall buttresses support the thrust of the central Perpendicular window at its base. A matching pair of tall, narrow lancet windows set deeply into their frames complete the symmetrical design.

A steep-pitched gable roof of slate shingle covers the church nave. Piercing each side of the roof's surface, five gable dormers with jigsaw aprons and quatrefoil tracery counter-balance five double-lancet multifoil Perpendicular windows on each principal side elevation. A simple parapet, following the slope of the roof surface conceals gable ends. The climax of the main block's symmetrical design is a decorative granite pinnacle which sits atop the peak of the central ridge. As the fulcrum of balance in the total composition, the main block's smooth, rectilinear surfaces and the sharp, clean outlines of each detail establish a strong point of departure from which the subordinate architectural members radiate.

The square three-and-a-half story granite tower with a polygonal wooden spire and corner buttresses seems rather simply appointed in comparison to the central section. As the most obvious vertical member of the composition, verticality - the telling feature of Gothic design - is stressed, becoming more attenuated with the rising altitude. A deeply recessed lancet-arched doorway leads to the interior gallery's stairway, lighted by the multifoil stained-glass window at the second story. Ventilated double-lancet openings with thick granite surrounds punctuate the four sides of the tower's upper surface and are framed on either side by the steep pinnacle heads of the corner buttresses. Steeply-pitched gablets spring from the lower stage of the tower, pointing upward to the slender finial which tops the tower. By contrast, the porte cochere, on the opposing side of the central block, is of smaller proportions and height. Rising one-and-a-half stories, this granite structure with lancet-arched openings is distinguished by its slender decorative square bell-cote with wooden spire and crowning finial, sitting at an angle upon the ridge of the roof parapet.

Inside the church, the rectangular main block of the exterior becomes one large open auditorium. Conventional early Gothic ecclesiastical design dictated that the interior be separated into three spaces: a narrow nave and two side aisles, having an approximate relation to one another of one to two to one. Here, the nave fills the entire rectangular mass, with solid rows of pews to

either side of a center aisle. The chancel, at the northern end of the building, is merely a simple raised platform which serves as the pulpit's pedestal and has seating to accommodate a small choir. The organ and choir gallery are at the front, over the main entrance. As unfamiliar as the Gothic mode is for Congregational Churches, so too the Congregational interior arrangement with an open auditorium-like space is uncommon in an otherwise Episcopalian church design. This is reflected in the roof's structural framing.

Rather than a complex skeletal system supporting the aisle roofs and the main roof of the nave, the Southport Church's roof is supported by a simple open hammer beam truss construction. The structural system is basic and straightforward - the members are bracketed directly from the wall, receiving supportive thrust from the wall itself - and less interesting than the detailing of the hammer beam members. Deeply cut quatrefoil and stylized Gothic motifs in the roof trusses give the church a rich, unspoiled appearance. Smooth white plaster walls and ceiling are accented by oak board-and-batten wainscoting in the auditorium section and carved wooden paneling around the chancel area. The narrow stained-glass windows with double-lancet and multifoil tracery to each side and carved oak beams above create a strikingly handsome space.

6. Alterations and additions: In 1884 a chapel was added at a right angle to the rear of the original structure. Following is a chronology of the addition's construction as recorded in the Fairfield "Advertiser."

August 28, 1884 "Work has been commenced upon the proposed addition to the Congregational Church Chapel."

September 11, 1884 "The Schooner S.C. Nash, of Stonington arrived here, with a load of stone for the Congregational church, on Saturday."

September 18, 1884 "The improvement at the Congregational Church is progressing finely."

October 9, 1884 "The addition to the Congregational church is being rapidly pushed forward toward completion."

December 25, 1884 "The addition to the Congregational church chapel will be completed this week."

January 1, 1885 "The Congregational Church has presented Hope Chapel with new carpet, and a new stove has been put in so that the little congregation feels quite happy."

Relatively minor repairs and alterations were completed at various time throught the century. These items were listed in the Southport "Chronicle" and Fairfield "Advertiser." See Bibliography for exact citations.

January 1, 1885 "A scaffold was erected on the spire of the Congregational church Monday for the purpose of repairing the steeple."

January 15, 1885 "On Wednesday [January 14], Messrs. McKeel & Jenning put up the Weather Vane on the spire of the Congregational Church. The Vane is of copper and makes a fine appearance. The fenial [sic] is 15 feet high, and the vane is 6 feet 8 inches long. 1876 is cut in the vane, the weight is 300 pounds."

January 29, 1885 "The chapel of the Congregational church is being frescoed."

July 15, 1885 "The outside of the Congregational Church is being repaired."

August 19, 1886 "Several of the large timbers in the belfry of the Congregational Church have been removed and heavy iron rods put in their place."

August 26, 1886 "The parsonage of the Congregational Church has been painted."

June 11, 1891 "The Congregational Church is soon to be re-carpeted and re-cushioned."

B. Bibliography:

Fairfield "Advertiser," July 24, 1884; August 28, 1884; September 11, 1884; September 18, 1884; October 9, 1884; December 25, 1884; January 1, 1885; January 15, 1885; January 22, 1885; January 29, 1885; July 15, 1885; August 19, 1886; August 26, 1886 ; November 23, 1888.

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Southport "Chronicle," July 12, 1871; September 18, 1872; May 6, 1874; May 23, 1874; June 10, 1874; June 17, 1874; July 22, 1874; August 5, 1874; September 9, 1874; November 25, 1874; August 27, 1891; June 11, 1891; July 23, 1891.

The Southport Congregational Church, Southport, Connecticut,
March 7, 1843 - November 30, 1915: An Historical Sketch.
New York: Privately printed, 1915.

Prepared by Jan E. Cigliano
Staff Historian
Historic American
Buildings Survey
January 1979

PART II. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with the Southport Historic District Commission, several members of whom provided the necessary funds. The project was completed in the summer of 1966 under the general direction of James C. Massey, then the Chief of HABS; Ralph Schwarz of the Ford Foundation; and Architect John C. Waite (Columbia University); with assistant architects Christopher Benninger (Harvard University), Richard Haines (University of Kentucky) and Andrew Craig Morrison (University of Michigan), and architectural historian David T. Van Zanten (Harvard University), at the HABS Field Office in Southport, Connecticut. The data was prepared and edited in HABS Washington office in December 1978 by Jan E. Cigliano, staff historian. Photographs were taken by HABS staff photographer Jack E. Boucher in September 1966.